

# The Spartans Last Stand

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Summary: The final installment of the Wake Me trilogy.

## 1. Chapter 1

### Chapter 1- The Spartans Last Stand

The Covenant Experimental Battleship \_The Dark Flame\_ floated silently through the black emptiness of space like an alien fish, lingering on the very border of the Earths orbital ring the craft was surely an impressive sight to any who could have seen it.

The command deck of the craft was surely an even grander spectacle, a force of elite soldiers conditioned from childhood and inhabiting some of the finest military hardware ever created by human hands. A lone group of survivors of the SPARTAN programme operated the ship they single handily liberated from a secret Covenant research facility.

The advanced warship had been idling in Earth orbit for the past several hours, allowing its makeshift crew of super soldiers and artificial intelligences to initiate the repairs of the damage sustained during their escape from the Covenant facility. With the alien craft returned to peak operating efficiency it was time to return to the hunt, to return to the planet Onyx in search of any lingering evidence of the Spartan III program.

The bridge of the Covenant ship was serenely quiet with a lingering hint of military order and efficiency. Every Spartans present was performing one critical task or another; while some of the team were operating one of the main bridge consoles, their wide training and experience with Covenant technology allowing them to quickly decipher the alien console, others busied themselves with maintaining their weapons or themselves through sparring. The majority of the squad however were sleeping on whatever clear patch of deck they could find spare.

"All systems normal. Prepare for transit to Onyx" Sakura announced through the bridge speakers. "Initiating Slipspace jump"

It was just as the ship was initiating the jump that the navigation console suddenly came alive with a flurry of lights and accompanying alerts. The warnings quickly drew the attention of the operator, Spartan III Natasha, accessed the system in an effort to discern the origin of the disturbance. "We've detected contacts, unknown energy signatures"

Sakura emerged on the holographic pedestal beside the navigation console, her holographic eyes scanning across the computer screen, analysing the data at an inhuman rate. Sakuras eyes snapped wide at the realization "Emergency shutdown" Sakura called out into the bridge. "Abort the slipspace jump! Abort-" a tremor tore through the serene calmness formed within the atmosphere onboard the ship. The human soldiers reacted purely on instinct, each reaching out to clasp any solid surface for support or simply shifting their vast weight to counter the roll of the craft beneath their feet. Even those who had appeared to be in a deep state of sleep were swiftly roused as though they had secretly been anticipating such a disturbance. All around alarms blazed and lights flickered and flashed, shattering the tranquil calm that had previously been.

Master Chief, who had taken it upon himself through rank and the loyalty and respect of his comrades as leader of his team, rose to take control of the situation. "What's the status of the ship?"

The holographic representations of the ships two artificial intelligences re-emerged on their pedestal, their holographic forms flickering and sparking as a forbidding account of the current state of the vessel as a whole. The images of the two women finally settled back into normality, allowing them to finally deliver their report on the situation. "Energy cells depleted, shields are down and engines are restarting. Hull integrity maintained, and interior atmosphere stable" Sakura rattled off reports on each of the ships vital systems; it seemed that miraculously the ship had survived whatever cataclysmic event had struck them intact.

"So what hit us?" John asked.

"No direct impacts detected to the ships hull" Cortana replied.

"Then what was it?" John asked, his tactical mind fighting to make sense of the situation.

Sakura interjected. "Currently unknown, sensors array overloaded, recalibrating"

That was the harrowing thing about space vessels, without their vast array of sensors and cameras lining the hull of the ship they were trapped in a single room surrounded by the cold vacuum of space, blind to the universe around them. Their training instructor had dubbed it the 'Fog of War', and constantly assured them that the fog of war could prove fatal if it were not quickly dispelled.

"Activating exterior cameras" the main viewscreen in the centre of

the bridge crackled with static, the veil of interference slowly receding to reveal the cold, black vacuum of space which surrounded them. An image slowly drifted past the cameras view, something gray and metallic. Although to the undiscerning eye the image would appear to be little more than one of the infinite pieces of floating debris that had been orbiting the Earth since the development of space flight to any who had encountered the technology before it remained a fresh and dark memory. The camera slowly withdrew to reveal the true extent of what they had witnessed the blanket of grey forming into the angular and smooth contours of a vast machine of ancient origin and design.

"Sentinels" the Spartans spoke with near perfect repetition of each others words.

"Confirmed, Sentinel energy signatures detected emerging from slipspace" Cortana accessed the ships database, a vast array of data gathered on the Sentinels cycled through the holographic display in a search of any information of use. "Alert, Covenant ship signatures emerging alongside Sentinel group" the exterior camera moved to catch the instant as the Covenant vessels emerged from slipspace in a blazing flash of light, their curved fish like structure a vast contrast to the angular and mechanical design of the Forerunner Sentinels.

"I have analysed the energy signatures of the enemy formation" Sakura announced. "The largest sentinel craft appears to be serving as the flagship of the fleet, in terms of size and armament it serves as the equivalent of UNSC Supercarrier" the exterior camera showed the vast Sentinel craft, the largest vessel in the formation its design did not match any known ship parameters. Although massive in scope its structure remained true to the structure of its smaller counterparts. "There are Covenant loyalist Destroyers, Cruisers, Carriers and frigates, they support the Sentinel strike craft which appear to be capable of anti-fighter and close range support. The entire force appears to be the equivalent of an entire human fleet"

"Plotting trajectory" Cortana interjected. "Based on their current fight path they are on a direct course for Earth" As the fog of war slowly began to clear they could finally discern the true extent of the Sentinel force which had just emerged at the edge of the Sol system without warning and the very real threat they posed to the unprepared human fleet.

"We need to warn the UNSC fleet" John said.

Sakura was quick to react, closing her eyes she placed the finger tips of her right hand to her forehead seemingly lost in deep thought as she returned deep to the computer mainframe. "Emergency alert transmission broadcast on all UNSC frequencies, although it is unlikely they will be able to respond in time"

"We need to give them time, allow them to muster a counter attack" John turned to face the holographic representations of the ships Artificial Intelligences. Even though they were entirely artificial constructs occupying the system of the Covenant computer system, capable of responding only to the auditory receivers integrated within his helmet John still chose to face their holographic images as though they were sentient humans. "Bring the ship between the Sentinels and the planet" John ordered. "Charge the weapons and bring

the outer shields up. We need to hit them with everything we have"

"We just drained all of the ships energy into the slipspace drive in order to attempt the jump, it will take time to redistribute the energy" Cortana replied. "We cannot initiate a cold start of the engines, bring the shields up and fire the main cannons simultaneously"

John pondered the tactical situation. "Focus on priming engines and the shields. We need to get between the Sentinels and the UNSC fleet and defend them until they can retaliate"

"We'll see what we can do" Sakura and Cortana returned back into the computer system, their holographic avatars disappearing into a flurry of shattered light fragments.

Seconds later the ship once again lurched beneath their feet. The readouts scrolling across the computer screen showed the energy being distributed across the ships systems slowly being drained towards the ships propulsion system, the Covenant battleship moving seemingly of its own accord as it floated through the vacuum of space towards the embattled fleets. The ship slowly began to gain speed as the engines returned to life after an extended state of dormancy, the empty vacuum of space offering little resistance to the advancing craft as it shot towards the planet.

As the Covenant ship approached its target Sentinel strike craft patrolling the outer fringes of the encroaching fleet formation swiftly broke away to engage the stampeding ship. The bright orange beams of Sentinel energy weapons flared against the semi-visible barrier protecting the ship. The attacking Sentinels did little to hamper its evergrowing advance; most of the small sized craft were unable to keep pace and swiftly left in the trailing wake of its engine emissions. However those few who dared to stand in its way smashed against the leading edge of the craft, the insignificant craft instantly disintegrating in splinters of alien metal as the Covenant battleship rode over them.

"Warning" Sakura interjected. "The Sentinel battleship is charging its main weapon" From the cameras view they could see the vast nose of the Sentinel battleship parting to reveal the chamber of a weapon similar to the Sentinel Energy beam scaled up to a size possibly capable of devastation on a planetary scale. "Energy levels indicate the weapon will cause significant damage upon impact. Estimated time to firing, twenty seconds"

"Fire all engines; we cannot allow it to attack the fleet" John ordered.

"Disengaging safety restraints, engaging engines to maximum parameters" the alien ship bolted forwards as the propulsion systems were driven beyond their normal range.

The Sentinel Battleship fired its primary weapon, a beam of super charged energy that split the sky and tore across the dark void of space towards its target. "Energy weapon impact in threeâ€¦ twoâ€¦ on-

## 2. Chapter 2

### Chapter 2: Fleet and Fire

The beam of energy struck the supercharged shield with a thunderous roar of an ancient unstoppable force striking the immovable object of modern technology. The sheer force of the impact striking the ship was far more than even Spartan MJOLNIR armour could counteract; casting them across the bridge like toys of their former glory they crashed harshly against the polished metal walls.

Inevitably, with no natural outlet for the destructive force, the concentrated beam of energy exploded outwards, the shields collapsing as they struggled to maintain the protective barrier around the ship. The battle had been done, a stalemate had been drawn.

"Report" Nick coughed, sucking air into his lungs in an effort to regain a firm grasp of his senses. "Everyone still alive?" Nick groggily dragged himself to his feet. "Holler if you're dead" A series of muffled groans and spluttering coughs swamped the shared COM channel, through sweat burnt eyes Nick could make out the vague outlines of the other Spartans as they began to drag themselves back onto their feet.

"All vital signs remain within normal parameters" Cortanas voice seeped through the squad's COM. "No significant damage detected within the ships systems. It appears we have survived, not entirely sure how, but we made it"

John hauled himself upright, shaking his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. "What about the fleet?"

"UNSC fleet formation remains intact" Sakura said. "Some residual damage from the aftermath of the explosion but our shields absorbed the brunt of the impact. Overall fleet strength remains unchanged"

"The force of the Sentinels weapon was immense; the technology appears to be like nothing we have encountered even amongst Forerunner technology"

"Alert" Cortana interjected. "I am detecting increased power signatures from the Sentinel Battleship, they are charging for another shot. Shields are still recharging, it is unlikely we will survive another direct hit"

"I am receiving a transmission from Lord Hood" Sakura announced. "Patching it through to the main viewscreen"

The main viewscreen resolved into the image of the man who remained the final word of scattered UNSC command, Lord Terrance Hood. The fleet Admirals features were creased with grim determination he knew that whatever had occurred the UNSC once more found itself in the grip of war. "\_Chief, is that you, are you still in one piece?\_"

The Spartan squad assembled in front of the view screen. "Affirmative sir" John responded to his commanding officer. "However our attempts to block the enemy attack have left our shields and engines disabled, we are working to repair it now"

"You took quite a beating to save our asses, that's what I call taking one for the team, now we're ready to return the favour" Lord Hood activated something just out of view. "All ships, take up defensive positions around the Spartans ship. Concentrate fire on the main Sentinel Battleship. Take that monster out"

The main viewscreen divided to reveal the live camera feed showing the view of the UNSC fleet as they swam through the void of space, gathering in a defensive cluster around the crippled Covenant ship. A formation of UNSC Longsword fighters swooped past \_The Dark Flame\_, their engines glowing with a deep cerulean blue as they approached the enemy battleship at their highest speed. "\_Talon squadron moving into attack position against the enemy ship" \_Talon leader reported.

"\_Remember Talons" \_Talon five interjected.\_ "High speed low drag\_" although lightly armoured and agile the UNSC craft were armed with Shiva Nuclear missiles, sacrificing anti-fighter weapons for a chance at eliminating the immense battleship. The small size of the nimble starfighters allowed them to slip past the patrol ships defences whilst the larger UNSC ships drew the fire of the enemy fleet.

A second flight of Longswords joined in the attack. "\_Reaper squadron on station, clearing the way for Talon, fly it like you stole it boys\_" Quick not to be out flown \_Reaper\_ Longswords moved ahead of \_Talon\_, ready to take the brunt of the enemy fire and retaliate against any enemy strike craft which dare approach them. A group of Sentinels descended on the UNSC ships like a plague of robotic locusts, the red orb in the centre of their casings erupting in a burning red beam of super charged energy splitting the empty void of space. The energy beams struck the wing of one of the trailing Longswords; although not imminently catastrophic the glancing blow was sufficient to force the pilot to fight for control of his wavering craft.

"\_Keep it together Talon squadron\_" Talon leader ordered, praying his pilots could maintain their formation until they reached the target. "\_We're almost there\_" the flight of \_Reaper\_ Longswords met the advance guard of Sentinels with a barrage of machine gun fire, human projectiles crossing Sentinel energy beams as the warring ships clashed. Several of the fragile alien craft splintered and fractured within the hail of human gunfire, the Longswords swooping through the ensuing debris field with the remaining Sentinels swiftly following in pursuit, even losing ships the machines simply reformed their ranks and adapted to the pilots tactics in an instant.

With their enemies now at their tail the \_Reaper\_ Longswords quickly found themselves on the sole receiving end of the attack. The agile \_Talon\_ fighters continued their charge towards the Sentinel battleship in the centre of the enemy fleet formation, only deviating from their intended flight path to evade another beam of energy fired from the pursuing Sentinels. With the valiant pilots of \_Reaper\_ flight serving as a vanguard force \_Talon\_ found their path towards the target clear, allowing them to set up their approach towards the enemy battleship.

Dropping into the glide path towards the target the flight suddenly found themselves under an intense barrage of fire from the surrounding ships anti-fighter weaponry, beams of plasma dancing across the sky in the hopes of intercepting their the small targets.

A stray shot struck the wing of Talon Three, the damage causing the ship to falter in flight. "\_Stabilizers failing, I'm losing control\_" another strike to the crafts wing sent the fragile spacecraft into to a spiral dive directly into Talon Five trailing just off its wing, the two craft instantly disintegrating in a shower of shattered metal fragments. The loss of Talon Three and Five in a single instant was a major blow to the squadron, but it did not change their objective which lay within sight and the mission had to be completed no matter the cost. The flight of UNSC Longswords came within firing range of the Forerunner battleship.

"\_All Talons acquire target and prepare to blast these mechanical devils back to the void they spawned from!\_" Talon leader called out over the squad COM channel. Each of the three remaining fighters armed their Shiva Class nuclear missiles, each of the warheads carrying sufficient ordnance to obliterate an unshielded Covenant capital ship. The combined firepower of three simultaneous nukes would prove a devastating attack few would be capable of opposing.

The three remaining \_Talons\_ released their ordnance simultaneously, the three missiles smoothly detaching from their housings, their self-contained engines engaged and as they suddenly leapt at high speed towards the intended target. The missiles closed in on the battleship, the breath of every UNSC soldier caught in their throat at the thought that the success of this single act could end the battle and with it cease the inevitable conflict to follow before it could dare to escalate-

"\_Contact!\_" Talon lead called out. "\_Covenant Destroyer approaching us at high speed, they're going to ram us!\_"

Such a bold tactic was not unheard of amongst some of the more aggressive and ruthless Fleet Commanders of the Covenant Armada, rather than attempting to hunt down the agile strike craft in ranged dogfighting they chose to simply ram their larger ships into the centre of the enemy fighter formations and smash through to their backlines once their fighter support had been crippled.

The Covenant Destroyer only continued to gain in speed as it closed in towards the UNSC formation, the agile fighters sacrificing their formation and scattering in all directions as the enemy ship drew closer. However despite the broken formation the rampaging craft did not alter its course to intercept them, continuing on its flight path across the nose of the Sentinel Battleship. The true intentions of the captain commanding the Covenant ship only became apparent once the craft had thrown itself into the path of the incoming nukes, the ship's Captain willing to sacrifice the lives of himself and his crew for the preservation of Forerunner technology.

The weapons struck the hull of the shielded capital ship, each warhead detonating simultaneously in a combined explosion with each combustion only enflaming those which came before them. The shockwave of the eruption ballooned out from its epicentre, engulfing the Covenant Destroyer, many smaller Sentinel craft as well as several members of \_Talon\_ and \_Reaper\_ squadron unfortunate to be caught in the blast before washing over the two fleets like a cascading wave. When the eruption finally settled only \_Talon\_ One, Four and \_Reaper\_ One and Three remained. Once the smoke had cleared it soon became clear that despite their best efforts the enemy command ship had

survived the barrage and was quickly preparing a swift counterattack.

"\_Talon and Reaper squadrons break off your attacks\_" Lord Hood ordered. "\_The target is still active\_"

Promptly following their orders the tattered remains of the two Longsword squadrons engaged their engines and shot at high speed back towards the UNSC fleet. "\_Roger fleet command, Talon and Reaper squadrons returning to- wait!\_" a fresh flight of Sentinel strike craft descended on the crippled UNSC squadrons from nowhere, eager to resume the hunt. With \_Talon\_ flight ill equipped for closed range dog fighting and with \_Reaper\_ squadron effectively destroyed the only option was a hasty retreat with the soulless machines already close on their tails.

"\_They're all over me\_" cried over the COM channel as the machines swarmed around Talon Four.

"\_I can't get them off of me\_" Reaper Three snapped sharply to one side in an attempt to evade his pursuers, however it remained clear that without immediate support the fighters would not survive the engagement.

"\_UNSC Frigate Blue Eclipse\_" the voice of the ship's Captain interrupted the flow of garbled traffic over the open frequency. "\_Moving to support Talon and Reaper squadrons\_" the Paris-class heavy frigate could be seen just as it emerged from its position at the flank of the UNSC formation. Although barely a considerable match for Covenant ships of a similar size, lacking the armour and firepower necessary for sustained ship to ship combat, the ships manoeuvrability and versatility combined with its vast array of point defence weapons may prove the saving grace which spared the shattered remains of the UNSC fighters-

"\_Negative Blue Eclipse\_" Lord Hood interjected. "\_Maintain formation, we can't afford to lose another ship\_"

"\_But sir-\_" the ship's Captain began to retort.

"\_They do their duty so that we may do ours\_" Lord Hood interrupted. "\_Their sacrifice shall be remembered\_"

"\_With respect, sir\_" the Captain gave the rank through audibly gritted teeth. "\_I am afraid I cannot stand by and-\_"

The Sentinel Battleship fired another beam of energy, electing to strike out at the one who had dared to step forward to challenge it. The beam of super heated plasma washed over the hull and began peeling away the surface within in seconds, once it had cut deeply enough to pierce through the entire structure what remained swiftly detonated into fragments as the interior pressure released into the empty vacuum, another sacrifice to be remembered. Without support the shattered remains of \_Talon\_ and \_Reaper\_ squadrons were swiftly cut apart by the pursuing Sentinels. The Spartans crew was left in sullen silence. It had been a sound strategy, but the sheer strength of the enemy force appeared to make them invulnerable to such tactics.

"Incoming transmission" Sakura's soft voice broke the stale silence.



"It is Lord Admiral Hood"

As summoned by the mere mention of his name the Lord Admirals time ravaged features emerged on the main viewscreen to stare down at the SPARTANS crew. "\_Chief, I hope you've got another ace up your armour because I am at a loss here. All I see is some Covenant loyalists still going after the Prophets ideal of the Great Journey, dropping on our doorstep with a whole lot of new tech tearing our fleet apart. I thought we had them beat when you took their Prophet of Truth?\_"

"Lord Hood" Cortana replied. "The death of the Prophet caused significant disarray within the Covenant Hierarchy, but it seems now that they have managed to rally together once more"

"\_Well, whatever happened they're here with guns blazing and we need a strategy endgame. I cannot order the fleet to keep firing blindly into the dark without knowing what it is we're up against and how we're going to beat it\_"

"Chief" Natasha, operating the ships weapons console, called for the Master Chiefs attention. "\_The Dark Flames\_ weapons are back online"

"Shields are charging" Amy announced from the engineering console.

"Sir" John addressed Lord Hood. "We cannot falter now, we need to retaliate immediately. Order the fleet to focus fire on the Sentinel battleship. Perhaps our weapons combined with the fleets may be able to destroy it"

"Or if that fails we'll surely give them a black eye at least" Cortana quipped.

Hood pondered his words, pinching the base of his nose between his finger tips, his eyes screwed tightly shut in silent contemplation, the sullen silence was almost palatable. Hood finally raised his gaze to meet them. "\_Very well Chief, you have your fleet, now put it to good use\_" Lord Hood activated the fleetwide broadcast channel. "\_All ships, focus fire on the Sentinel Battleship, hit it with everything we've got left\_" it seemed a full assault remained their only option. The truth was that when your back was pressed against the wall the only way out was to go right through them, hard.

A flood of acknowledgements swarmed the frequency, each ship's Captain bringing their crew to readiness in preparation for the new grand offensive. Following the command of their leader the formation of UNSC ships opened fire with a barrage of Archer missiles, MAC rounds and point defence fire that rocketed towards the leading face of the Sentinel Battleship. The Sentinel drones, which made up the bulk of the invading fleet, swiftly leapt to the defence of their mothership. Firing energy beams to destroy the incoming projectiles or simply using their chassis as a shield to deflect the barrage yet despite a determined defence the majority of the fired munitions struck the hull of the Sentinel Battleship with a flare of ignited explosives, resulting in mere cosmetic damage.

The Covenant escort ships decided upon a more direct counter offensive, targeting the UNSC ships with a hail of plasma fire. Even

as another and another human ship was lost to Covenant fire the human attack did not waver in its intensity with shells peppering the entire surface of the Sentinel ship to the extent that it almost became consumed in an unceasing cloud of light and exploding heat.

With its weapons systems now operational \_The Dark Flame\_ was prepared to enter the fight. The ships plasma turrets rotated to track their target, the tips of the mighty guns glowing with a vibrant purple hue as the alien energy was formed and manipulated by the intricate systems within the exotic weapon. The main guns discharged in a flurry of superheated plasma fire streaming towards the enemy ship in a continuous beam of light which split the void left trailing in its wake. Plasma washed over the hull of the ancient ship, flaring wildly as the material clashed against the intense heat of the raging inferno.

The attack began to subside, the sheer intensity of the sustained assault beginning to burden upon the fleets already strained ships as well as their individual munitions reserves. Inevitably the barrage finally ceased entirely, the last few missiles striking their target in an impotent flash of light. The smoke finally cleared, the leviathan emerging with little more than superficial damage scarring its surface.

The Sentinel Battleship was swift to retaliate, firing another beam of energy into the heart of the UNSC formation, destroying any ships caught in its wake, dealing another heavy blow to the weakened fleet. "\_The enemies too strong\_" one of the ships Captains declared. "\_We have to pull ba\_c\_k\_"

It was clear that the troops were shaken, it quickly became apparent they were prepared to panic and scatter in all directions in a desperate bid to evade the ever tightening grip of the Covenant fleet, only to fall directly into the firing lines of the enemy ships as they attempted to break orbit.

"\_Negative, this is our only chance\_" it was only Lord Hoods stern control that maintained order. "\_If we fall now Earth falls with us. Destroy that monster no matter what the cost\_"

The revelation suddenly dawned upon her. "It's vulnerable when it fires" Cortana announced to the Spartan crew, drawing the obedient attention of each soldier. "We need to strike it as soon as it retracts its armour to reveal the glowing red optic"

John pondered the revelation before addressing his commander. "Sir, order all ships to target the Battleship, as soon as it fires-"

"That won't work!" Sakura interjected sharply. Although small in stature and demure in speech her voice carried with enough force to silence the one who had single handily brought ruin to the Covenant. All eyes were upon her. "This isn't ground combat chief; you can't just eyeball it and shoot from the hip. We only get a single chance at this, if we are even off by a few metres it will not destroy the target, we need a proper firing solution"

"Lord Hood" Cortana addressed the human leader directly. "We need to secure a link between The Dark Flames and the whole fleet; we're

going to hit them with everything we've got"

Lord Hood found himself consumed by the knowledge that the fate of all humankind lay upon the shoulders of the decisions he made at this moment in time. "Alright, I'll make it happen. Good luck, everyone"

John turned to face the holographic representations of the ships AI's still standing atop the glowing pedestal. "Are you sure you can do this?"

Cortana and Sakura simply smiled back at him. "But of course" Cortana began. "Remember who you're talking too" and Sakura finished.

With their peace made the holographic images of the two AI's collapsed in upon themselves in the blink of an eye as they returned to the depths of the computer system to begin their task.

"Do you really think we can do it?" the simulated voice of the AI who in her past life had simply been the artificial curator of the UNSC Frigate Forward Unto Dawn resonated through the endless void of data which consumed them.

"It's not really a case of 'Can we do it', more that we have little choice in the matter" Cortana replied. "Besides, what do you think will happen if the Covenant destroys the ship with us still in its systems?"

"I do enjoy your feral optimism in times of crisis" Sakura smiled simply because she feared that she may be driven to the point of insanity if she didn't. "Shall we begin then?"

"After you" Cortana offered her position with a brief wave of her hand.

Sakura placed her hands together before her chest and lowered her head as if praying in solemn silence for some miracle to save them. As her hands parted a sheet of pixelated light unfurled betwixt her fingers, the sheet rising and expanding before her until it had formed into a large holographic screen before her. Sakura passed her fingers across the surface, the image seamlessly resolving into a tactical view of the looming battle around them, each UNSC ships cluster of dots indicating its relative position was underplayed with reams of data regarding each ships weapons systems, navigation, engines, all of which would be required to plot an accurate firing solution with any hope of striking the Sentinel battleship where it would hurt.

"Activating network links with the UNSC fleet" Sakura opened herself up to embrace the vast network of computer systems, the moment she opened herself a torrent of data rushed over her like a raging wave and swiftly brought her to her knees. She had never experienced anything as intense and overwhelming, her entire 'life' she had remained contained within the body of the UNSC Frigate Forward unto Dawn, the ship would call out to her and she would respond in kind. Now the songs of a hundred ships swept over her, the gentle cooing of frigate propulsion systems intertwined with the melody of the navigation computer of a heavy cruiser several hundred kilometres away. The sound was maddening; she wanted to shut it out, silence the voices, to make it stop.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder, the roaring voices falling to gentle whispers. Cortana helped draw her companion to her feet, she made it quiet. With the voices silenced Sakura could finally see things as they were; the other ships became an extension of herself, of her consciousness. She quickly returned to her role; filtering and organising the endless stream of information being broadcast to her she channelled the data to Cortana who then plotted an appropriate firing solution before transmitting it to the fleet. The scale of the process was vast, requiring any excess processing power the Artificial Intelligences could muster.

The process appeared to be going according to plan; with each new packet of data they received another finalised firing order was relayed to the fleet. Yet despite their current success they could both feel the strain of their work massing heavy upon their shoulders. They could not afford to request assistance from the human crew, any attempt to assist them would be limited by reaction time and technical knowledge and thus the burden fell to them alone. Even for a smart AI such as Cortana the sheer amount of data moving through her was proving overwhelming. Had either of them dared to attempt this themselves they would have been utterly destroyed by the experience. However together, dividing the weight of the task between them, they could endure if only for a short time.

The final fragment of data passed through the system, the final firing solution transferring to the central computer of the UNSC ship. The sequence was complete.

"\_All UNSC ships, the Sentinel battleship is preparing to fire again\_" Lord Hood addressed the ships Captains. "\_Ensure you lock on the target using your acquired firing solution and do not engage the target until I deliver the order. Once the order has been given hit that monster with everything we've got left and do not hold fire under any circumstances\_"

The order drew the attention of the entire Spartan crew to the main viewscreen, from that singular view they could clearly see as the UNSC formation lead an attack which would see an end to the UNSC resistance. The nose of the Sentinel battleship opened to reveal the burning optic of the ships main weapon, prepared to deliver what would likely be the final killing blow.

"\_All ships, fire weapons!\_" at the single command the entirety of humanities remaining military space force concentrated a barrage of archer missiles, MAC rounds and close range support fire. The munitions moved with calculated efficiency, gliding towards the target with a serene elegance in near perfect synchronisation, they each struck the surface of the ship in an uproar of fire and smoke. In this instance the armour could not rise to defend the intricate circuitry held within the alien craft, the large red oracle which served as a conduit for the destructive energy of the immense battleship splintered and fragmented into a thousand tiny shards. The human resistance rallied, the battle had finally turned in their favour.

"\_We took significant losses right out of the gate in this battle\_" Lord Hood pinched the tip of his nose, the strain of the situation falling heavily upon his shoulders as the adrenaline flowing through his system finally subsided and the harsh reality of their

circumstances and the burden of his command became ever clearer. "\_Of those strike craft that managed to launch in the initial wave over seventy percent were destroyed without close range ship support. Over a dozen Frigates and Corvette class vessels were destroyed or crippled in their berths as well as the Crusier UNSC Haley's Destiny\_" Lord Hood concluded with a solemn sigh. "\_On top of these losses from the battle itself the fleet has been reduced to roughly sixty-four percent of its effective military strength, and frankly we were not much to begin with. We never would have stood a chance without your team Chief\_"

"It was Cortana and Sakura, sir" John replied. "They saved the fleet"

"\_Yes, your shipboard intelligences. What is their condition?\_" Hood asked the question as though they were truly human.

"They appear unharmed" John replied. "However the strain of the attempt nearly shattered their 'minds', I would not recommend another attempt"

"\_On that we can agree\_" at the call of Cortanas silky voice the two figures emerged on the holographic projector. "But, thank you for your concern; we're still in one piece"

"\_That's good to hear\_" with their safety secured the Lord Admiral quickly returned to the task at hand which continued to loom over them. "\_Now, what do we know about this ship?\_"

"The Sentinel Battleship does not match any known Sentinel Ship profiles although the material and design shares a commonality with known Forerunner technology" Sakura looked up to address the admiral directly. Despite her rather demure appearance she proved herself again and again to be unshakably resilient in the face of danger. "We believe it to be a new variant and have classified it codename '\_Leviathan\_', its weapon we will call '\_Dragons Breath'\_"

"\_What is the status of the ship now?\_" Lord Hood asked.

"Sir, we tracked the majority of the Sentinel forces retreating out of range of our weapons but they have yet to depart the system entirely. It appears our attack disabled the main gun of the Sentinel Battleship; however we anticipate that it will not be long before the enemy fleet either departs entirely or attempts a counter attack. But we have another matter we must address"

Sakura accessed the ships viewscreen, dividing the view between the live transmissions from Lord Hood combined with a computer representation of the looming battlespace displaying the remnants of the two fleets against the backdrop of Earth. "While the UNSC fleet was contending with the main force of the Sentinel fleet a small detachment of their force departed the theatre and descended towards the planet's surface beneath the cover of the battle" Sakura trailed a holographic finger in front of her to draw a line from the Sentinel fleet towards the surface of the planet.

"It is almost as if they're recreating the Prophet of Truths attack from before" Cortana said. "While the majority of their fleet engaged us in ship to ship combat a small force was dispatched to wreak havoc on the ground in search of whatever little box of secrets they're

hunting after this time around"

"Are they returning to Mombasa?" John asked, the memories of operations to hold the city against Regret, the slipspace rupture which tore apart the city and returning to find the portal to the Ark being excavated from beneath the desert sands.

"It appears not" Sakura replied, drawing in the view of the holographic image towards the surface of the planet. "Currently all enemy forces dispatched to the surface of the planet have landed in eastern Asia, specifically the Russian city of Vladivostok"

"What could they be looking for there?" Lord Hood asked.

"I think it's about time we found out for ourselves" Cortana re-emerged onto the holographic panel. "Make sure they get a warm Earth welcome, what do you say?"

The sense of anticipation was tangible; each being a soldier trained to fight the SPARTANS felt a communal sense of unease at being trapped within a ship floating in space instead of having their feet planted firmly on the surface of a battlefield with an enemy they could fight and win against. The ever clawing feeling of helplessness and loss of control carried too many dark memories.

"I am afraid that I must remain to operate the ship" Sakura admitted. "As a ship AI I may operate with a minimal crew onboard"

"Chief, I volunteer to remain with the ship" David stepped forward without hesitation.

"As do I" Michael stepped forward to support his squad member.

"I'll stay as well" Joshua announced.

John gave a silent thank you for the courage of his soldiers, by volunteering for those who would stay on the ship while their squadmate's were on the ground fighting gave him an overwhelming sense of pride. Despite their different origins and training for a war none of them had ever wanted they were standing together as a single unit and today they were going home.

The SPARTAN ground team stepped out of the central elevator into the open void of the ships main hanger bay, the endlessly vacant room only obstructed by smart lines of Covenant ships ranging from individual fighters to assault Dropships. The plan was a simple one, while Sakura remained onboard on the Covenant ship, aided by the Spartan Crew, John and the ground team would take the Covenant ships docked in the hanger bay to reach the planet's surface.

Dividing into two teams John and Natasha headed towards the row of Seraph Fighters, two of which would serve as the escort ships for the T-52 Phantom Dropship piloted by Nick, Amy and Sara carrying the bulk of their equipment, both their standard weapons and the Covenant technology they had salvaged from within the ship. With so little operational Intel on what to expect once they reached the surface it seemed wise to come prepared for any eventuality with guns, safeties off and a few rocket launchers.

While the rest of the group loaded weapons and ammunition and

prepared the Dropship for inevitable combat Natasha and John climbed into the cockpit of their Seraph Fighters and began to familiarise themselves with the controls of the alien craft. Their intense training and extensive experience with Covenant technology allowed them to quickly assimilate into the alien craft and take a firm grasp of its complex control systems. With control over the alien fighter firmly established they engaged the engines, the light alien craft lifting off of the polished surface of the hanger floor to waver gracefully in the air like a leaf dancing in the breeze.

"\_Our target is the city of Vladivostok\_" Cortana emerged atop the holographic projector in the centre of the instrument panel in front of the pilot's seat, bathing the cockpit in a tranquil blue glow. "\_But between here and the city we've got a few hundred Sentinel ships backed up by one of the largest pieces of Forerunner technology we have ever encountered. So pretty much standard odds given our proven track record\_"

The dropship rose of the deck, seemingly unhindered by its heavy burden of cargo and personal it remained burdened with. "The Seraphs will fly point and clear any fighters in our flight path; the Dropship will follow behind and head straight for the LZ. And remember people, no heroics out there"

"\_Says the man who flew out of a spaceship riding on the back of a bomb\_" Natasha swiftly quipped as the two leading Seraphs broke free of the hanger bay into the empty void of space beyond. The Phantom Dropship followed swiftly in their wake, carrying the remnants of the SPARTAN's into battle as they had done so many times before.

The sleek fighters descended towards the surface, swiftly dodging and evading the sea of debris lingering in orbit the planet, it was not long before their bold advance drew the eyes of their enemy. From amongst the display of grand battleships and fighter craft exchanging fire across the battle space Sentinel fast attack craft descended upon the ships like a plague of fiery locusts, their beams of red energy splitting the skies between them to chase the stolen Covenant craft through the scattering remains.

"\_We have Sentinels on our six\_" Nick declared. Despite their shared skills as expert pilots there was simply no way that a heavy transport would be able to keep pace against several pursuing attack craft. They had to change their tactics.

"Nick, maintain course towards the city. Natasha and I will keep them busy until you're clear"

"\_Acknowledged\_" Nick responded.

While the dropship continued its course the two escort fighters suddenly pulled a crazy Ivan on their pursuers, snapping around sharply to face their attackers into a fast approaching head-on collision. Turning to face their enemies head on was a bold strategy, facing the Sentinels directly left the fighters little room to manoeuvre around the incoming fire and floating debris. But such was their purpose in life, the bold sacrifice of the few to allow their comrades the briefest glimpse of escape to reach the planet's surface and continue the fight.

John and Natasha fired the main plasma weapons of their fighters, the

beams of energy struck the two leading Sentinels, each exploding in a shower of broken metal. But that was merely the loss of a single line of ships, with their weapons still cycling from the first volley the two fighters were left exposed to the incoming blaze of the Sentinels lasers. The beams of red fire struck the leading edge of the agile fighters, the heat of the blaze melting through the outer hull to corrupt and damage the delicate electrical systems beneath.

"\_Chief\_" Nick's voice over the COM was a welcome reassurance. "\_We've cleared the atmosphere and are descending towards the city\_"

"Roger" Cortana replied, allowing the Master Chief to focus solely on keeping the both of them alive as the Sentinels came around for another pass. "We're on our way down-" another system malfunction caused the cockpit control panel to spark with the flash of damaged circuits, the communication link failing to leave them in the silence of the void. "Assuming we still enough of a ship to get us down there"

Their fate mattered little now. Whatever happened they had completed their objective and allowed the Dropship the brief window to ensure they could reach the city and continue the fight, which was what the Spartans had trained for. It was what they continued to live for.

"\_Chief\_" Natasha's voice shattered the moment of silent contemplation with some faint essence of hope. "\_You've got another flight of Sentinels on your tail. You need to-"\_ the cockpit fell silent once again.

The Master Chief could feel the force of the descent pulling him in every direction, the strike of another impact by the pursuing Sentinels snapping him around in the cramped compartment as they continued their descent towards the planet's surface.

\_This is the Covenant Carrier Sovereign Legionâ€¦ We have arrived at the edge of the system and are moving into attack formation against the enemy fleet.\_

End  
file.